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ABSTRACT

The education and training of persons working in the field of aging is of vital importance to improving the quality of services available to older persons. A statewide training needs assessment was conducted in Illinois to set priorities for the funding of state educational programs and to improve the linkage between providers of aging services and institutions of higher education. A training needs assessment instrument covering 76 tasks and competencies was completed by Directors of Aging Services, Area Agency staff, and State Office staff (N=280). Results showed that the greatest need for education for all respondents was in understanding federal, state and local laws and eligibility requirements pertaining to older persons. Directors of Services reported a need for training in supervision and administration and in grant writing and fiscal procedures. The primary training needs of Area Agency staff were in programming and program evaluation, while State Office staff reported a need for training in procedures for information management and dissemination. These differences in training needs among the three groups demonstrate a need for establishing distinct sets of training priorities. (Author/NRB)

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SETTING TRAINING PRIORITIES:
A STATEWIDE TRAINING NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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The education and training of those who work in the field of aging is of vital importance to improving the quality of services available to the older persons. However, in order to be most effective, education and training programs must be planned and provided with an understanding of the areas in which training is most needed.

The purpose of this study was to aid in this planning effort by conducting a statewide assessment of the educational needs of those who administer and provide services to the older population of Illinois. It was hoped that the results of this study would be considered in setting priorities for future training programs.

In addition to its utility for planning activities, this study also yielded significant information for educators and for those anticipating careers in gerontological services. It afforded insight into the day-to-day activities of individuals at varying positions within the aging network including directors of programs, staff of area agencies on aging and staff of a state department on aging.

During the past ten years needs assessment has become an accepted and expected activity in the field of social services. Needs assessments can, however, be misleading or misinterpreted if adequate attention is not given to the relationship between the concept of needs assessment and the particular method or approach adopted in a needs assessment study. It is useful to think about three major approaches to assessing needs, regardless of the specific domain of needs or population involved.

The first approach is to obtain information about needs from a panel of experts. For example, a study of the needs of older people in a particular planning and service area might use a panel of experts which consisted of

prominent senior citizens, directors of programs for older persons, educators, and area agency on aging staff members. This approach assumes that the perceptions of people who are actively involved in working with and for older persons provide a valid basis for assessing the needs of older persons themselves. Similar panels of experts could be constructed for other domains of needs such as the needs of displaced homemakers, the needs of recent immigrants, or, as in the present case, the educational needs of service providers in the field of aging. In each case an assumption similar to the one stated above would be in effect: that the perceptions of experts provide valid information on the needs of a target population.

The second approach to needs assessment is to survey a representative sample of the target population and to obtain through questionnaires or interviews the perceptions of the group members themselves. Thus, in the examples mentioned above, instead of constructing panels of experts, representative samples of older persons, displaced homemakers, recent immigrants or providers of services to older persons would be surveyed for the needs assessment. This approach assumes that the perceptions of a representative sample of the target population provide a valid basis assessing the group needs.

The third approach is to make inferences about needs from behaviors rather than from perceptions, opinions or judgments. For example, in the case of assessing the social and health needs of people in a particular planning and service area the degree of need for different kinds of services could be inferred from the frequency of different calls to an information and referral service: the greater the frequency the greater the presumed need. Similarly, educational needs could be inferred from enrollment in different courses, with higher enrollment indicating higher presumed need.

Studies using any of these three approaches can legitimately be considered needs assessments and, if carried out in an appropriate manner, can be viewed

as providing valid information about needs. However, each of these approaches also carries with it an unique problem or weakness. These problems or weaknesses do not in any of themselves invalidate either the idea of doing needs assessment studies of the findings of any given study. Each of these problems or weaknesses, however, should be recognized and understood by the consumers of needs assessment research to avoid confusion about what can and cannot be known on the basis of a given needs assessment study.

The strength of the first approach, the panel of experts, is the emphasis that it places on the judgment and experience of those with broad perspective on the problems of the target population. Implicit here is the idea that all perceptions are not equally valid and the opinions of those with responsibilities or expertise ought to be given greater weight than the opinions of others, even if the others are members of the target population and the experts are not. The major weakness with this approach is that the perceptions of the experts may not accurately reflect the needs of the target population. Rather the needs which the experts attribute to the target population may actually reflect the needs of the experts themselves, needs related to the performance of their occupational or social roles.

The strength of the second approach is in the emphasis that is placed on the assessment of need in the target population itself. Implicit here is the idea that the opinions or judgments of those who are actually members of the target population ought to be given special consideration in any research which purports to measure the needs of that target population. The major problem with this approach is that self-reported needs are subject to various forms of distortion or response bias, most notably the tendency to present a socially desirable response. Another problem with this approach is the frequent difficulty in defining the population from which a representative sample could be drawn. Even with a target population as narrowly defined as "aging service

providers," identification of the population for purposes of drawing a representative sample can prove a major obstacle to the execution of this approach to needs assessment.

The strength of the third approach is in the emphasis it places on actual behavior rather than on perceptions, opinions or judgments. Implicit here is the idea that actual behaviors are a better indicator of need than interpretations or opinions. The major problem of this approach is that behavioral indicators of need are restricted to the existing opportunities for meeting needs and generally cannot reveal unmet needs. For example, in one of the examples cited above the degree of need for different types of education was inferred from enrollment in existing courses. However, areas in which there is a great need for education may not be covered in courses currently available. Exclusive use of this behavioral indicator would fail to reveal such areas of need.

The strategy adopted in this study was a combination of the first and second of the approaches described above. Those surveyed can be viewed as a panel of experts. The vast majority of the respondents (88 per cent) had supervisory responsibility over service providers or administrators of services. Their supervisory positions enabled them to report on their perceptions of the educational needs of a segment of the target group, in a manner analogous to the way that doctors, and hospital administrators might be asked about the health of people in their communities. The design of the questionnaire recognized respondents capability of answering from a perspective broader than that of their own educational needs. For each of the tasks specified on the questionnaire respondents were asked to indicate the importance and need for education of "those you supervise."

However, those sampled in the survey not only constituted a panel of experts, they also constituted a significant portion of the target population. They,

themselves, were members of the aging network in Illinois and were eligible for training programs offered under Title IV-A of the Older Americans Act. In this respect the study adopted the second of the approaches described above. The design of the questionnaire also recognized the status of the respondents as members of the target population by asking the extent to which the respondent himself or herself had a need for education in each of the areas addressed in the questionnaire.

METHOD

Definition of Survey Population: Because of the origins of this survey in the state's Title IV-A Training Plan, the population for the survey was defined in terms of programs and administrative services supported through the Older Americans Act. In consultation with the Training Officer, of the Department on Aging it was determined that the following groups would be included in the survey: Directors of Multipurpose Senior Centers, Directors of Nutrition Sites, Directors of all other services which had contracts with area agencies on aging, Directors and staffs of area agencies on aging, and staff of the Illinois Department on Aging. Questionnaires were mailed to all individuals in these groups. Extra questionnaires were mailed to each of the area agencies so that additional staff members not shown on available mailing lists would have an opportunity to respond. A total of 623 questionnaires were distributed.

Structure of Questionnaire: The main body of the questionnaire consisted of 76 tasks and competencies relevant to the job duties of those who provide services for older persons. These tasks were organized into six categories: Programming and Delivery of Services, Fiscal Procedures, Fostering Professional Growth and Staff Development, Public Relations, Office Procedures and Facilities Planning, Supervision and Administration. For each of these 76 items respondents were asked to make four ratings: 1) The importance of the task or competency in terms of their overall job performance; 2) Their need for education in that area;

3) The importance of the task or competency in terms of the personnel whom they supervised; and 4) The need for education in that area of the personnel they supervised. Each of the importance ratings was made on a 5 point scale ranging from little or no importance to extreme importance; each of the need for education ratings was made on a 5 point scale ranging from little or no importance to extreme importance. In addition to the questions regarding the 76 job related tasks and competencies, respondents were asked to provide demographic information and general information on their position in the aging network and to rate a variety of training methods and formats.

RESULTS

A cut-off date four weeks after the date of mailing of the questionnaire was established for inclusion of responses in this report. A total of 299 questionnaires were received on or prior to the cut-off date, yielding an overall response rate of 48 per cent. Of the 199 questionnaires returned by the cut-off date, 7 were found to be completely blank and 12 were found to be over 50 per cent incomplete. These 19 questionnaires were excluded from the data analysis. Highlights of the results will be presented separately for the three major categories of respondents: Directors of Services, Area Agency Staff and State Staff.

A major concern of this study was to determine the education and training needs of persons who are responsible for the management of programs and services such as multipurpose senior centers, nutrition programs, and transportation services. These individuals are designated in this report as Directors of Services.

Directors of Services average ratings of their need for education in each of the 76 areas delineated in the questionnaire were calculated. Table 1 presents the 5 items with the highest mean ratings. Directors of Services indicated that their greatest need for training was in developing and writing

grant proposals, other tasks and competencies in which training was most needed were understanding federal, state, and local laws and eligibility requirements pertaining to older persons, preparing budgets, stimulating public interest in planning and supporting needed services and developing program evaluation procedures.

The staffs of the 13 Illinois Area Agencies on Aging constituted the second major group of respondents in the survey. These respondents occupy diverse positions and levels of responsibility. It is assumed, however, for purposes of this analysis, that regardless of the particular responsibilities of the AAA staff respondents, they do have a shared perspective because of their location within the structure of the aging network.

Table 2 presents the 5 tasks and competencies rated highest in need for education by AAA staff. AAA staff indicated that their greatest need for training was in understanding federal, state, and local laws and eligibility requirements pertaining to older persons. This was also the item they rated most important in the overall performance of their jobs.

Four other tasks and competencies rated highest in need for education by Area Agency staff were: preparing grant proposals, preparing budgets, developing program evaluation procedures, and serving as a consultant for the development of new programs.

The third group of respondents in the study were the staff of the state Department on Aging. Table 3 shows the principal educational needs of the respondents in this group. Greatest need for education was in understanding federal, state, and local laws and eligibility requirements pertaining to older persons. Other areas in which a strong need for education was shown were understanding federal, state, and local governmental organizational structures; preparing budgets; devising and implementing record keeping systems; and prioritizing objectives and setting deadlines.

Respondents were also asked their perceptions of the educational needs of those whom they supervised. The instructions acknowledged that the respondents might supervise people who performed a wide range of duties, but asked for a general assessment of their employees' needs for education. The responses of the Directos of Services to these questions are particularly interesting to those of us involved in gerontological education: Directors of Services indicated that their staff's greatest educational need was in understanding the psychological, social and physical characteristics of older person. They rated this item as a less important educational need for themselves.

Analysis of questions pertaining to demographic variables revealed a fascinating feature about the ages and occupational experience of those in the network of aging services: the inverse relationship between age and what we might call centrality of position in the aging network. As Table 4 shows, Directors of Services tended to be older than AAA staff who in turn tended to be older than State staff. Directors of Services also had more years of experience in the field of aging than either AAA staff or State staff. In a sense those with widest responsibilities have least experience in the field of aging. On the other hand, another aspect of this relationship is that those who work more directly with older persons tend to be older themselves.

CONCLUSION

For all categories of respondents in this study there was a high need for education in understanding federal, state and local laws and eligibility requirements pertaining to older persons. Directors of Services, however, noted a particular need in the areas of developing, preparing, and writing grant proposals; AAA staff showed a high need for education in working with grant proposals and budgets and also in developing program evaluation procedures. State staff reported a high need for education in the areas of devising record keeping systems

and prioritizing objectives. Understanding the psychological, social and physical characteristics of older people was viewed as an important area of education for those directly involved in the provision of services, but was not rated as significant an area of education for the administrative personnel included in this survey.

The results of this survey have been useful to and have been used by the State staff in making decisions about needed training programs in Illinois. The findings should also be noted by gerontological educators in making choices about curricular offerings.

Table 1

Five Tasks and Competencies Rated Highest in Need for Education:

Directors of Services

	Task/Competency	Mean[a]
1.	Develop and write grant proposals.	3.578
2.	Understand federal, state, and local laws and eligibility requirements pertaining to older persons.	3.573
3.	Prepare grant proposals.	3.571
4.	Stimulate public interest in planning and supporting needed programs.	3.531
5.	Develop program evaluation procedures.	3.459

Note: N = 148

[a] 1 = little or no need; 5 = extreme need

Table 2

Five Tasks and Competencies Rated Highest in Need for Education:

Area Agencies on Aging Staff

Task/Competency	Mean
1. Understand federal, state, and local laws and eligibility requirements pertaining to older persons.	3.415
2. Prepare grant proposals.	3.286
3. Prepare budget.	3.280
4. Develop program evaluation procedures.	3.202
5. Serve as a consultant for development of new programs.	3.183

Note: N = 86

Table 3

Five Tasks and Competencies Rated Highest
in Need for Education:

Illinois Department on Aging Staff

	Task/Competency	Mean
1.	Understand federal, state, and local laws and eligibility requirements pertaining to older persons.	3.395
2.	Understand federal, state, and local governmental organizational structures.	3.289
3.	Prepare budgets.	3.130
4.	Devise and implement record keeping systems	3.043
5.	Prioritize objectives and set deadlines.	3.022

Note: N = 46

Table 4

Age, Sex and Occupational Experience of Respondents

	Directors of Services	AAA Staff	IDOA Staff	All Respondents
Number	148	86	46	280
Age				
Range	20-83	20-70	21-70	20-83
Mean (Years)	46.1	39.9	39.3	43.1
Sex				
Male	33 (22%)	30 (35%)	19 (41.3%)	82 (29%)
Female	111 (75%)	55 (64%)	27 (58.5%)	193 (69%)
Not Reported	4 (3%)	1 (1%)		5 (2%)
Occupational Experience				
Years in Present Position				
Mean	4.8	2.4	2.0	3.6
S.D.	4.3	1.8	1.8	3.6
Years in Field of Aging				
Mean	7.1	4.1	4.2	5.7
S.D.	6.1	2.7	3.1	5.0